#### **CASE STUDY: METAL**

## THE COLOR OF MITTALL

BY KEN TAYLOR

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# Florida aluminum sublimation specialist goes beyond the small and the usual.

started playing around with sublimation in California back in 1994 while I was in the business of selling automobile mechanic creepers (that board on wheels that mechanics use to work under cars). In the beginning, my sublimation work was pretty much limited to coffee cups and aluminum dash plaques, but I eventually began making aluminum trophy plaques and a limited number of T-shirts. Eventually, in 1999, I moved to Florida.

That all changed, however, when I agreed to produce two large sublimated aluminum panels for Snap-on Tools. The 37 1/2" x 14 3/4" panels (that were to

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Sublimated collectible metal calendar.

be used on the lids of a sandblast cabinet and matching parts washer) would be much larger than the 12" x 24" pieces of aluminum I'd used up to that point, so I began scouting around for larger sheets. Unfortunately, I quickly found out that nobody had such coated aluminum sheets in stock. I'd never dreamed there wasn't any big aluminum out there to buy.

Since I had told Snap-on that I could handle their order, I was forced to look for an alternative.

Eventually, someone was able to find some large sheets of coated steel for me, so I sublimated to them: The Snap-on piece was a great-looking licensed image by Harley-Davidson of a bald eagle.

For future jobs, however, I needed to get away from steel because it eventually rusts, while aluminum doesn't. Being a customer of Condé Systems, I called them for advice. Conde's suggestion was that since Universal Woods—the Unisub folks—already coated large sheets of wood, they might be able to coat large sheets of metal, too. I called Paul Neumann, Universal's president, and convinced him that there could be big business in coating large sheets of metal. One thing led to another and I was soon buying lots of 4' x 8' sheets of coated aluminum from Universal Woods.

#### **METAL MASTERY**

Since that time, I've sold all sorts of sublimated products to companies and individuals involved in the automotive industry, which at one time was 99% of my business. I've produced mini refrigerator door panels—5,000-6,000 of them (see the image of the mini refrigerator in this article)—for such

major tool companies as Snap-on, Mac and Matco; and I've produced countless 2' x 3' aluminum signs for individual car owners, the Barrett-Jackson Auction Co. and more than 100 hot rod and motorcycle magazines—all while continuing to provide lots of hot rod shows with dash plaques, trophy plaques, T-shirts and large aluminum panels (signs that stand in front of the featured cars with a picture of the car and details on it).

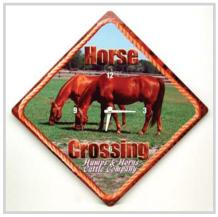
I've often gone to hot rod shows, secretly taken digital pictures of someone's car, produced a 2' x 3' sign using that image, and then taken it to the next show for him/her to see—they'll just about break an arm reaching in a pocket to pay me for it. If they see it, they've got to have it.

I recently sent GM one of my 2' x 3' signs featuring one of their new cars—telling me they couldn't believe the quality of the image on aluminum. The company ordered 30 of the signs to send to various

### Breakdown of what we used:

Project: 2 'x 3' Unisub sublimation-coated aluminum panel
Equipment: Epson 9000 and Mutoh Falcon printers large-format printers; Geo Knight 30" x 40" Maxi Press Graphics: Onyx PosterShop RIP; Adobe Photoshop Ink system: ArTainium UV+ Heat Settings: 390 F at firm pressure for 60 seconds Transfer paper: DyeTrans HiRes Paper - I use it for everything from aluminum to

T-shirts.



Crossing sign clock is 16 inches square.



Mini crossing signs (5" x 5") and license plates for souvenir sales.



Sublimated metal mini refrigerator door dresses up office and dorm.

corporate offices and then placed an order for 3,000 dash plaques to be used for all of the events that they sponsor.

More recently, my sister got me involved with Florida State Parks. We went to a show and persuaded a parks representative to sell our products to all the major parks in Florida. We're currently getting one to three new customers per week from parks and gift shops around the country—selling them customized license plates, refrigerator magnets, crossing signs, large informational signs and menu boards.

Here's an example of a large sublimated metal project.

reduce Magenta by 35%-40%. I then choose "Blacks" and manually increase Cyan by 10% and Black by 10%-20%.

The image took three minutes to manipulate before sending to the printer.

Once these changes are made, the image is ready to print. With large-format printers, such as the Epson 9000 or Mutoh Falcon I use in house, I printed to the finished size. Remember, this is a transfer, so be sure to print the image in reverse.

I save the image as a tiff file and print from Onyx PosterShop to either wideformat printer loaded with ArTainium aluminum using heat tape to prevent excessive paper shrinkage. The bigger the piece of aluminum, the more tape I use. Place the aluminum face down (transfer face up) on the press and, before actually closing the lid, pre-heat for about 10 to 20 seconds. For big panels, I press for 60 seconds at 390 F. In this project I used my 30" x 40" Geo Knight Maxi Press—I recommend it to anyone that wants to get into sublimation beyond "small format."

When done, turn the panel over and press for an additional 15 seconds.

Because the panel is heated evenly all the way through, a better transfer is

produced. That second heating has saved me a lot of waste. Be sure to wear heat-resistant gloves when removing the hot aluminum substrate from the press. If your heat press isn't by a table, have a rolling cart to lay the finished piece on to cool.

When you consider what you can do, the sky's the limit for anyone getting into sublimation. I suggest that you do as much in-house as possible so that you can keep the competition off your door. But when you focus on a particular area, even the competition has to work hard to equal your own expertise.

Market your work: Talk about it and show it. As long as you don't overprice it, people will buy it.

I thank Condé Systems for all the great support, and Snap-on for all the great business they've given me—both have made me what I am today.

### PRODUCE A LARGE ALUMINUM PANEL

The project, which is a 2' x 3' x 0.03" (thick) with Unisub sublimation coating polyester-coated aluminum panel, will be for a panel for a sandblasting unit.

I always prefer to have customers send me digital images via e-mail; they work well and I can have them set-up in no time. (A 150- to 200-ppi resolution works to get a good image for a project this large.

The first thing I do is bring the image into Photoshop and resize it to 2' x 3'. Next, set the image resolution (200 dpi) and change the color mode to CMYK (instead of RGB, which is what everyone else in sublimation does). Because I use my own color profiles, I always color correct any blues and blacks found in the image. By choosing Image>Adjust>Selective Color and then selecting "Blues," I manually



Parts washer and sandblast cabinet sublimated with Arctic Cat design.

UV+ CYMK inks.

I use DyeTrans HiRes and SPP paper from Conde. (It's HiRes when it's in the roll form, SPP as a cut sheet. They're really both the same paper.) The roll is 44" wide.

Securely tape the transfer to the



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